WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?

Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention
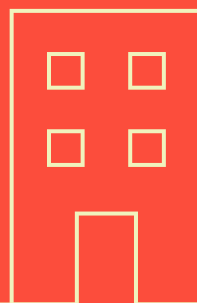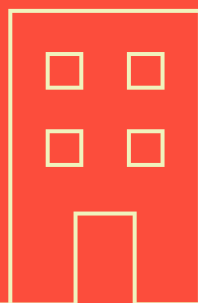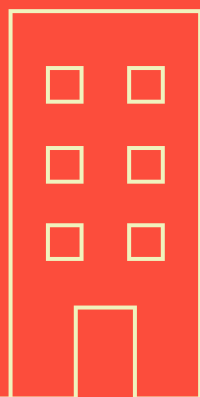
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kaitlin Schwan, Stephen Gaetz, David French,
Melanie Redman, Jesse Thistle, Erin Dej

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CANADA

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Download the full report at: www.homelesshub.ca/WhatWoulditTake

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Are we making significant headway on youth homelessness in Canada?

Are we stopping young people from becoming homeless?

Are we ensuring that young people transition out of homelessness quickly, and do not become homeless again?

It is time that we started taking a good, hard look at these questions. In our efforts to end youth homelessness, we have primarily focused on providing emergency services and supports to young people while they are homeless. Unfortunately, this hasn't gotten us the results we want. Youth homelessness in Canada is an ongoing problem for which we seem to be making slow but insufficient progress. It is time to consider a new approach – *the prevention of youth homelessness.*

The *What Would it Take?* study asked young people with lived experience of homelessness: what would it take to prevent youth homelessness in Canada? Between July 2017 and January 2018, A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness consulted with youth across Canada to ask:

- What would have prevented your homelessness?
- What programs, policies, services, and supports are needed to prevent youth homelessness?
- What do you want to tell the Canadian government about preventing youth homelessness?
- How do you want to be involved in making change on this issue?

The purpose of this report is to amplify the voices, insights, and wisdom of these young people in order to drive policy and practice change.

12	**17**	**7**	**114**
communities	*focus groups*	*provinces & territories*	*youth participants*

WHAT IS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION?

We asked youth across Canada to share their perspectives on youth homelessness prevention. But what is youth homelessness prevention, and what isn't it?
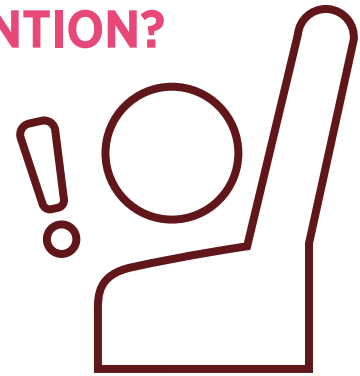
While preventing homelessness is generally regarded as a good thing, we often have little clarity about what it actually means. To address this confusion, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness released A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention in 2017, defining homelessness prevention as:

"Policies, practices, and interventions that reduce the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. It also means providing those who have been homeless with the necessary resources and supports to stabilize their housing, enhance integration and social inclusion, and ultimately reduce the risk of the recurrence of homelessness."

This definition also clarifies what prevention is *not*. Preventing homelessness must involve keeping a person housed, as well as immediately providing housing to anyone experiencing homelessness. While emergency services often provide a range of supports that build resilience, skills, and reduce the most negative impacts of homelessness, interventions that do not directly (or even indirectly) prevent the occurrence or reoccurrence of homelessness cannot be considered prevention. Similarly, interventions such as life skills, addictions supports, or mental health services can only be considered prevention if they are provided in the context of immediate access to housing.

We know that the causes and experiences of homelessness for youth are unique, calling for a distinct approach to youth homelessness prevention. This report helps us understand what youth homelessness prevention should look like from the real experts – young people themselves.

YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVES ON PREVENTION
Where should we focus our prevention efforts?

Youth explained that they became homeless as a result of many intersecting factors, such as poverty, family conflict, difficulty transitioning from care, limited availability of services, and landlord discrimination. To best understand these complex factors, and how our prevention efforts can target each one, we use a **social-ecological model**. A social-ecological model positions youth homelessness as the outcome of a complex interplay between three domains: *structural factors, systems failures,* and *individual and relational factors* (Gaetz et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2014).
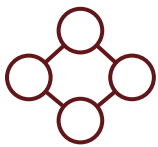
STRUCTURAL FACTORS

are broad systemic, economic, and societal issues that occur at a societal level that affect opportunities, social environments, and outcomes for individuals.

SYSTEM FAILURES

refer to situations in which inadequate policy and service delivery within and between systems contribute to the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. These include barriers to accessing public systems, failed transitions from publicly funded institutions and systems, and silos and gaps both within and between government funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.
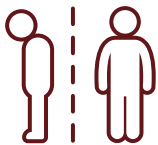
INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONAL FACTORS

refer to the personal circumstances that place people at risk of homelessness.

We can use this model to frame youth's perspectives on prevention and where we should target our efforts. Youth explained that to effectively prevent youth homelessness, we must address all factors simultaneously.

STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

Young people across the country described youth homelessness as rooted in the structures of Canada: the social, political, economic, and societal system and values that underpin our society. Youth felt that reform is needed to address six structural challenges: **poverty, lack of housing, colonization, inequity and discrimination, harmful societal values and beliefs,** and **adverse childhood experiences.**

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

POVERTY

STRUCTURAL PREVENTION must address

HARMFUL SOCIETAL VALUES & BELIEFS

LACK OF HOUSING

INEQUITY & DISCRIMINATION

COLONIZATION
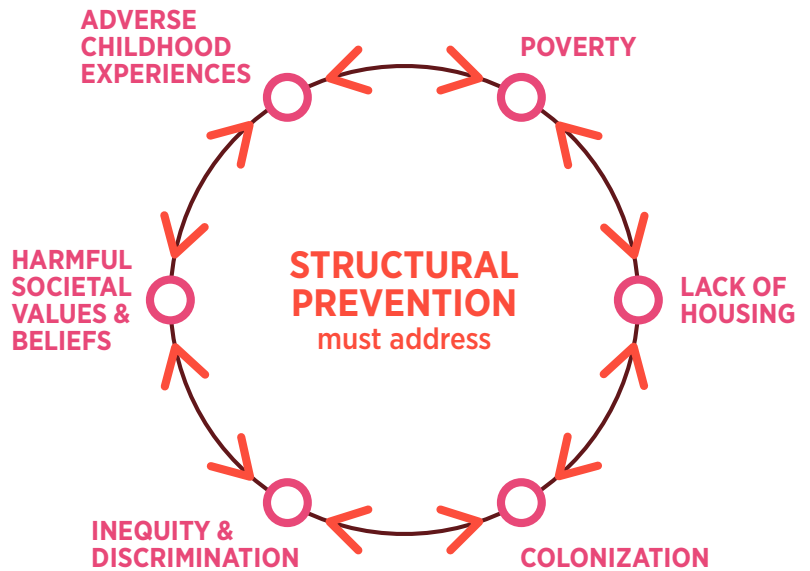
Structural Challenges Faced by Youth

Many youth described childhoods of precarious housing and poverty – experiences they linked to limited affordable housing, insufficient social assistance rates, and tight employment markets. Forced to choose between rent and food, youth's caregivers were often unable to properly feed or clothe their children. Some youth discussed cycling in and out of family homelessness, trying to hide their poverty from their classmates, and experiencing neglect because their caregivers simply couldn't make ends meet. Multiple youth discussed going hungry regularly, repairing their clothes during art class, borrowing spare change from friends, or having to the use their school's hot-glue gun to mend their shoes.

"Education is hard to get because housing is hard to get. What's easy is being a prostitute and selling drugs."

CALGARY YOUTH

For many, adverse childhood experiences of neglect or abuse forced them onto the street at a young age. Once on their own, the severe lack of affordable and safe housing became a significant problem. Youth emphasized the interdependency between housing, employment, and education, explaining how difficult it is to remain in school or employed without a home.

Several youth described working insecure, minimum wage jobs, sleeping on the street, and falling asleep in class as a way of life.

For many youth, these challenges were made worse by long waitlists for public housing and complex bureaucratic barriers to obtaining social assistance, youth housing, rent subsidies, and other services and supports.

Youth also described inequity and discrimination as part of their everyday lives, occurring in public and private spaces and systems. Youth vividly described experiences of discrimination and stigmatization when applying to rent housing, access income supports, or obtain a job, often on the basis of age, class, race, sexuality, gender, and/or disability.

The racism and inequity faced by Indigenous youth and their communities was a key theme in these discussions.

Indigenous youth linked their homelessness directly to the intergenerational trauma and poverty caused by colonialism, with one youth in Vancouver explaining, "Colonization, like, if that didn't happen, I feel like I would be so good."

Youth identified the multiple ways racism impacts Indigenous youth, including landlord discrimination, staff or worker racism in the child welfare system, and police practices that target and criminalize Indigenous Peoples. Importantly, youth framed these inequities as human rights violations.

According to young people, structural challenges are mutually reinforcing, often trapping youth in cycles of inequity, marginalization, and homelessness.

Youth were clear that poverty and housing precarity do not occur in a vacuum, but result from systems designed to create wealth for others, including settlers, housing developers, and large businesses and corporations.

Youth emphasized that homelessness prevention must involve tackling head-on the wicked problems that have plagued Canada for centuries: income inequality, patriarchy, colonial violence, inequity, and human rights violations. Fortunately, young people across the country offer practical, compelling solutions for implementing the structural change necessary to ensure better outcomes for youth.

Youth's Proposed Solutions

- Increase social assistance rates and create accessible pathways to quickly obtain social assistance, identity documents, and rent subsidies for youth and their families

- Remove policies that prohibit recipients from saving income or working while receiving social assistance

- Create emergency relief funds for youth and their families experiencing crises or facing eviction

- Protect existing affordable rental housing and regulate housing development and speculation

- Provide housing supports to youth and their families before they become homeless

- Significantly reduce waitlists for public housing

- Build and expand affordable housing for youth and their families, offering a range of housing models to meet the needs of diverse youth

- Do not predicate access to youth housing on mandatory attendance in programs, school, or employment, and reduce the acuity criteria required to access youth housing

- Increase funding for Indigenous supports, services, and community centres, including Friendship Centres

- Develop a youth homelessness prevention strategy specific to Indigenous youth

- Penalize landlords and employers for discrimination and develop accountability mechanisms so landlords and employers cannot continue to harm youth

- Make services, supports, benefits, and entitlements in all systems easier to access for youth with disabilities

- Increase social assistance rates for people with disabilities and chronic health issues

"To access BC housing or any youth rent subsidies, you have to be homeless for a minimum of six months before they'll even look at you. Six months is a long time. And there's no need for any youth to go through that just to get a house. Cause some of them can make it through that time period, but some can't."

VANCOUVER YOUTH

SYSTEMS PREVENTION

When young people were asked what would have prevented their homelessness, many youth traced these experiences back to system failures. Importantly, many youth felt that systems change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most effective. Youth discussed five key systems that need to develop policies, protocols, and practices to better prevent youth homelessness: **Education, Child Welfare, Healthcare and Addictions, the Youth Homelessness Sector,** and **Criminal Justice.**

EDUCATION

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

CHILD WELFARE

SYSTEMS PREVENTION
must transform

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SECTOR

HEALTHCARE & ADDICTIONS

System Failures Faced by Youth

Consultations with youth revealed the impact multiple systems play in their paths into, and out of, homelessness. Most youth traced the origins of their homelessness back to systems failures - inadequate policy and service delivery within public systems. These failures took various forms, including:

- Youth being transitioned out of the child welfare or healthcare system with little income or supports

- Youth under 16 being denied access to mental health or addiction services without parental signatures

- Youth being turned away from services or housing because they were not "homeless enough" to qualify for help (e.g., had not been homeless for more than 3 months)

- Youth being removed from housing, supports, or services when they couldn't meet the requirement that they participate in education or employment

- Youth struggling to navigate complex and confusing bureaucratic requirements to access services, including difficulties obtaining necessary documents (e.g., reference letters, ID, citizenship documents)

Youth explained that the eligibility criteria in many systems are too high and too stringent, leaving many young people stranded without access to supports or services.

Youth are rarely provided with the practical tools, information, or resources they need to access supports or services. Poor coordination within and between systems (e.g., child welfare and education) amplifies these difficulties, making services hard to navigate. Further, youth reported profound experiences of violence and discrimination within public systems (e.g., abuse and neglect in foster care). Many youth felt they had inadequate knowledge about their human and legal rights in order to address these experiences and other rights violations (e.g., police profiling, landlord discrimination).

Many youth were able to look back on their lives and pinpoint the key moment that the right supports or interventions could have changed their path into homelessness. Many youth reported reaching out for support during those moments – asking a teacher, a social worker, a police officer, a caseworker, or a doctor for help. For too many, however, these interactions failed them.
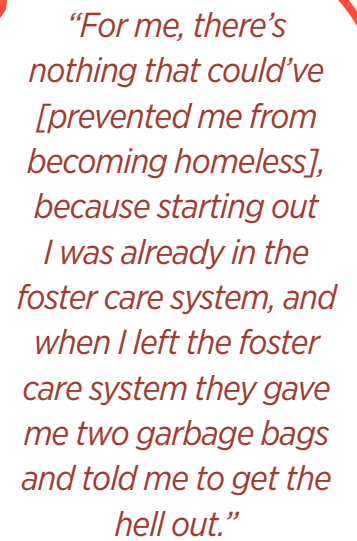
Youth reported that these professionals frequently ignored or discounted their experiences of abuse, neglect, homelessness, discrimination, or violence. In many cases youth felt further marginalized, traumatized, and isolated because of these interactions.

In fact, some felt they became homeless as a direct result of professionals' behaviours. In focus groups across the country, we heard:

- Youth were mocked for calling the police when they experienced family violence.

- Youth were silenced when they reported abuse in their foster homes.

- Youth were stigmatized by teachers for their mental health issues.

- Youth were kicked out of services because of their sexuality or gender expression.

- Youth were ignored when they said their home or building was unsafe.

These findings remind us that young people primarily engage with systems through the professionals that work within them. Youth emphasized the importance of ensuring that frontline workers have the tools, training, supports, resources, and workload to support youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, abuse, or neglect.

Many youth felt that system change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most *effective*.

"For me, there's nothing that could've [prevented me from becoming homeless], because starting out I was already in the foster care system, and when I left the foster care system they gave me two garbage bags and told me to get the hell out."

MONTREAL YOUTH

Consultations revealed that many of the personal and interpersonal challenges we identify as risk factors for homelessness – such as family conflict or health crises – only become pathways into homelessness when systems failures occur.

Youth explained that homelessness could be prevented for many young people if public systems provide access to the right supports when these crises occur.

Youth's Proposed Solutions

- Develop regional and community-based plans to prevent and end youth homelessness

- Increase accessibility, affordability, availability, and awareness of services across all systems (e.g., healthcare, the youth homelessness sector)

- Improve coordination and collaboration across services and systems to reduce barriers to accessing supports and services for youth and their families

- Improve training and education for professionals in all systems (e.g., social workers, teachers, doctors, nurses) on how to appropriately identify and respond to young people experiencing abuse, neglect, or homelessness

- Ensure all professionals are trained in anti-oppression, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, empathy, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency

- Educate young people on their legal and human rights, and how to access legal supports if their rights are violated

- Implement school-based mechanisms to screen for, and provide immediate supports to, youth experiencing abuse, neglect, mental health challenges, addictions, and homelessness

- Provide significantly increased funding for mental health services in all schools, ensuring all students have access to these supports

- Employ the principles of youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination across all systems

- Invest in and expand youth housing options as an alternative to foster care placement, including housing and supports specifically for Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and POC youth

- Offer income supports and services to youth with child welfare involvement up to the age of 25

- Enable youth under 16 to access services and supports without parental signatures

- End police profiling and criminalization of young people who are poor and homeless, including Indigenous and POC youth

- Ensure there are robust, youth-centred after care plans for youth transitioning out of hospitals, rehabilitation centres, detox centres, and recovery houses

PREVENTING INDIVIDUAL & RELATIONAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Youth homelessness prevention for individuals and families involves tackling the personal circumstances that place young people at risk of homelessness, such as medical crises, family conflict, or mental health issues within the household. Youth identified four areas in which policy change, increased supports, and improved access to services would be beneficial: **family conflict, abuse, and neglect; personal and family crises; social exclusion and isolation;** and **violence in the community.**

VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

FAMILY CONFLICT, ABUSE, & NEGLECT

PREVENTING INDIVIDUAL & RELATIONAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS
must address

SOCIAL EXCLUSION & ISOLATION

PERSONAL & FAMILY CRISIS

Personal and Relational Challenges Faced by Youth

Youth across Canada recalled countless experiences of conflict, abuse, and neglect, as well as personal health and addiction crises, often stretching over years and across multiple homes. Young people reported caregivers and caregivers' partners physically, sexually, and emotionally abusing them, often in the context of household substance abuse and/or mental health issues. Experiences of violence in the community were also very common in youth's lives. Some youth talked about areas in their city where casual physical and sexual violence was frequent, gangs recruited poor or homeless youth, and young people were encouraged or forced to engage in drug use and/or drug dealing.

Participants explained that youth who are homeless are often extremely vulnerable to these forces, particularly when they are chased out of safer areas by businesses or police officers.

Youth also linked their homelessness to mental health and health issues that went untreated due to the limited availability of supports and services, particularly in rural and remote communities. For many young people, their own challenges with health, mental health, or addictions were preceded by similar challenges that their parents faced with limited supports. These challenges were often intensified by the stigma associated with addiction and mental health issues, contributing to experiences of isolation for young people. Feeling excluded, isolated, and alone was frequently raised in focus groups, with youth reporting that they were "entirely alone," "had to figure out everything alone," and "had nobody."

When asked if they had anyone to help them figure out what to do once they became homeless, *almost all youth across the country said they had no one*.

Youth's Proposed Solutions

- Provide free family counselling and mediation, including for foster families

- Establish more safe injection sites and youth-focused detox and rehabilitation centres, ensuring services are youth-friendly

- Provide access to free courses, programs, or support groups on parenting and life skills, enabling parents who are struggling with poverty, addiction, and/or mental health issues to access help without fear of criminalization or having their children removed

- Increase the availability of non-judgmental spaces in which young people can talk about experiences of abuse and develop self-esteem, self-worth, and self-respect

- Build recreational and community spaces that are free to access and low-barrier

- Provide free counselling, life skills education, family mediation, and casework supports to caregivers struggling with parenting, including foster families
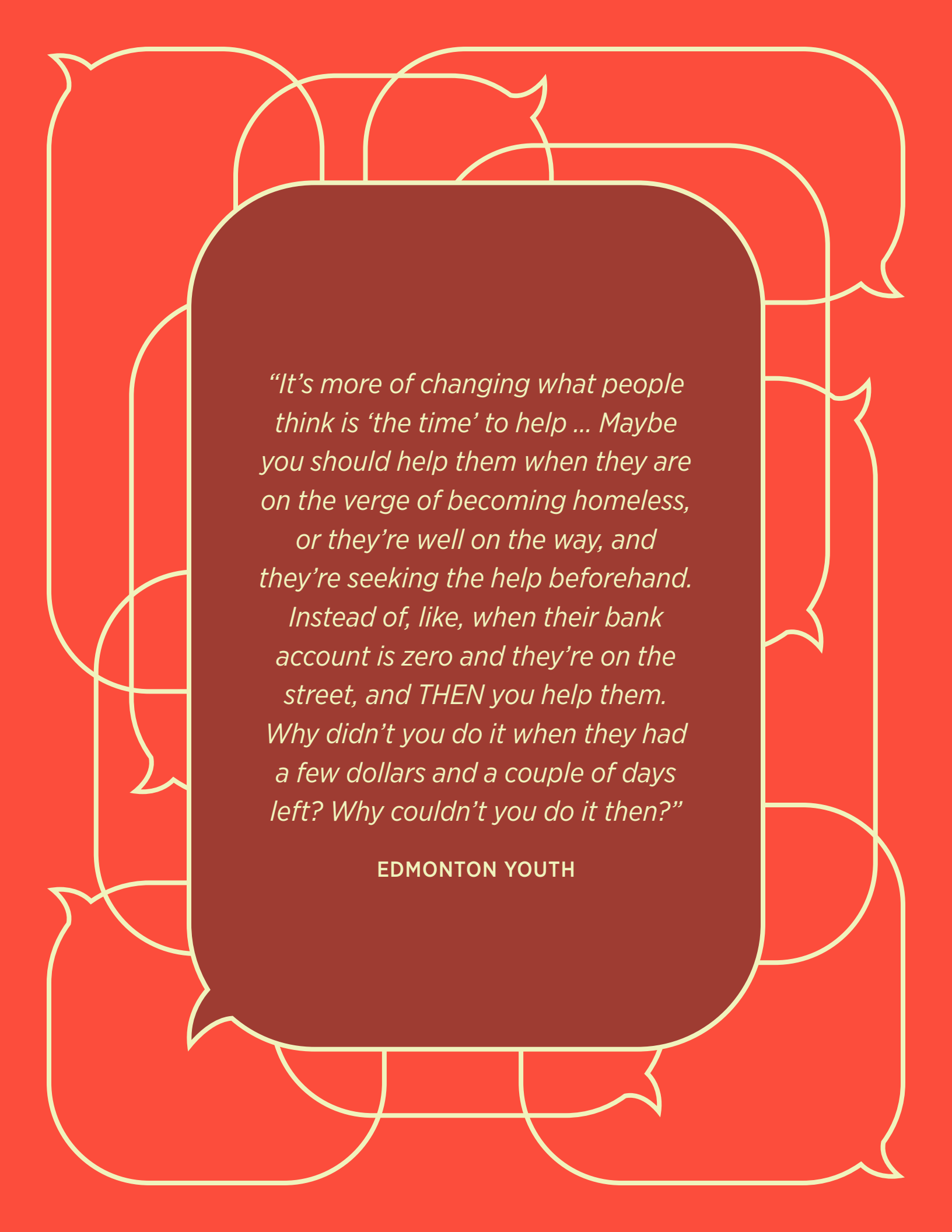
It's Time for a Proactive Approach to Youth Homelessness

Consultations revealed a crucial flaw in our approach to youth homelessness across Canada: we only respond *after* a young person is on the streets. In fact, in many cases we often don't even respond then. Young people across Canada told us that even after they became homeless, they couldn't get help due to lack of available services and housing, long waitlists, not qualifying for services, discrimination, or simply because they were told they weren't "in need enough" to receive help.

Youth were clear – we are waiting too long to intervene when a young person is at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

Youth showed us that, by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn youth to hardship and trauma, we actually *ensure* it.

In order to end youth homelessness, we need to adopt a proactive approach. A proactive approach means we intervene earlier, faster, and more effectively when a young person is at risk of homelessness, and we support youth to transition quickly out of homelessness. Any proactive approach must meaningfully respond to the challenges young people experience, and must centre youth as the experts capable of leading the shift to prevention.

"It's more of changing what people think is 'the time' to help ... Maybe you should help them when they are on the verge of becoming homeless, or they're well on the way, and they're seeking the help beforehand. Instead of, like, when their bank account is zero and they're on the street, and THEN you help them. Why didn't you do it when they had a few dollars and a couple of days left? Why couldn't you do it then?"

EDMONTON YOUTH

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

The results of *What Would it Take?* indicate that we are waiting too long to intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. To address this important finding, we have proposed a number of evidence-based recommendations grounded in human rights and equity. These recommendations are directed at the Government of Canada, provincial and territorial governments, provincial/territorial ministries and departments, and communities. For the full set of recommendations, see www.homelesshub.ca/WhatWoulditTake

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

1. Implement a Federal Strategy to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness with ambitious targets, supported by a targeted investment. This strategy should be grounded in a commitment to making Canada a world leader in preventing youth homelessness.

2. In renewing the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, the Government of Canada should ensure that youth homelessness and prevention are prioritized and supported by:

   • Targeted investments

   • Directives that support community implementation of youth-focused interventions, including Housing First for Youth

   • A requirement that community systems plans include a targeted youth strategy

3. Embed youth homelessness prevention within the Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy, ensuring that the Strategy provides the social and material supports needed to effectively reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with youth.

4. Ensure the housing needs of all youth and their families are adequately addressed and resourced through the National Housing Strategy.

5. Align ministerial, departmental, and program mandates and funding in order to more collaboratively prevent youth homelessness across Canada.

6. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all federal policy development, planning, and implementation processes related to preventing youth homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

7. Eliminate all policies, laws, and protocols that directly or indirectly discriminate against youth or their families on the basis of their housing status.

8. Provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection, as outlined in the Calls to Actions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness: A Proposal for Action.

9. Revise the Youth Criminal Justice Act's Judicial Measures and Sentencing to ensure a focus on the decriminalization of youth experiencing homelessness, and that courts follow the directive that judges must consider the youth's ability to pay before a fine is levied.

10. Adopt a national research strategy focused on youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems response to preventing youth homelessness, as outlined in Opportunity Knocks: Prioritizing Canada's Most Vulnerable Youth.

11. Implement cross-ministerial engagement and investment to support a youth homelessness strategy, with co-funded programs supported by Employment and Social Development Canada, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Department of Justice, Health Canada, Status of Women Canada, and other relevant ministries and departments.

PROVINCES/TERRITORIES

1. Implement a Provincial/Territorial Strategy to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness, supported by a targeted investment.

2. Embed youth homelessness prevention within Provincial/Territorial Poverty Reduction Strategies, ensuring that the Strategy provides the social and material supports to reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with children and youth.

3. In liaison with the federal government, establish provincial/territorial service standards in the area of youth homelessness, which in turn can be tracked provincially to inform funding decisions.

4. Prioritize and support systems integration in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. As part of this systems integration, all provincial/territorial ministries and departments should be mandated to identify their roles and responsibilities in addressing youth homelessness.

5. Invest in provincial/territorial knowledge development and data management specific to youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems approach to youth homelessness prevention.

6. Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to assess how the prevention of youth homelessness can be improved across systems, including through integration and improved access to services, supports, and housing for youth and their families.

7. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all provincial/territorial policy development, planning, and implementation processes that affect youth at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

8. Create provincial/territorial housing and shelter standards that meet the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, developed in partnership with youth and Indigenous communities.

9. Support communities to implement harm reduction models that focus on reducing the risks or harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive or other behaviours that pose risks for youth.

INTEGRATED GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS

1. Work across ministries, departments, systems, and sectors to employ an integrated systems approach to proactively address the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

2. Implement policy, strategies, training, and accountability mechanisms to support anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, solutions- and equity-oriented practice among frontline and managerial staff in all public systems who work with youth. All systems should develop targeted approaches to meet the needs of youth who are often served least well by public systems. Systems should be particularly attentive to ensuring equity for youth with disabilities, youth with mental health and addiction challenges, Indigenous youth, poor youth, youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, and youth experiencing abuse or neglect.

3. Provide integrated, ongoing, and meaningful training and supports for all system workers to ensure staff employ equitable, evidence-based practices in their interactions with youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Training and supports must be adequately resourced with targeted investments, enabling workers sufficient time and supports to ensure their approach aligns with evidence-based practices.

4. Adopt accountability mechanisms to assess the system's progress towards proactively addressing the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

5. Implement highly accessible mechanisms through which children and youth, and their caregivers or advocates, can report system failures, violations of their rights, and failures of system actors to respond ethically, adequately, or equitably.

6. Work across departments, ministries, and sectors to ensure housing stability and ongoing supports and services for young people who are transitioning from mental health care, child protection services, and corrections. This must involve harmonizing data and assessment tools to ensure youth leaving systems of care do not transition into homelessness.

COMMUNITIES

1. Develop and implement a community-level strategy or plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness with ambitious targets, supported by a targeted investment.

2. Prioritize and support systems integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

3. Foster meaningful youth engagement in the development of community policies and responses that affect youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

4. In reflecting on practice and programmatic responses to youth homelessness as articulated in the community-level strategy, community organizations should ensure prevention-based activities exist within the continuum of supports provided to youth.